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ABSTRACT

Teachers can greatly extend a child's literacy development through the use of interactive read-alouds. When a story is read aloud to children a number of opportunities arise for extended activities that are related to the story and further literacy support. Children are able to learn about literacy through an adult modeling good reading behavior. They may also form an understanding of print and how it is used with regard to letters and letter-sound relationships. Children are exposed to new words and vocabulary with each story read aloud to them, which will enable them to learn about sentence structure and in turn develop their own sentences. Children become familiar with the structure of a variety of stories and begin to develop a positive attitude toward books because of their understanding of the stories. Children are able to create their own stories based on their knowledge and familiarity gained from the stories. The survey of 22 teachers done by the researcher, which was conducted at a school in the Bronx, and the review of literature support these ideas. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/PM)

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by Leezill Terblanche

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Read-Alouds: Do They Enhance Students' Ability to Read?

Leezill Terblanche

Abstract

Teachers can greatly extend a child's literacy development through the use of interactive read-alouds. When a story is read aloud to children a number of opportunities arise for extended activities that are related to the story and further literacy support. Children are able to learn about literacy through an adult modeling good reading behavior. They may also form an understanding of print and how it is used with regard to letters and letter-sound relationships. Children are exposed to new words and vocabulary with each story read aloud to them, which will enable them to learn about sentence structure and intern develop their own sentences. Children become familiar with the structure of a variety of stories and begin to develop a positive attitude toward books because of their understanding of the stories. Children are able to create their own stories based on their knowledge and familiarity gained from the stories. The survey done by the researcher, which was conducted at a school the Bronx, and the review of literature support these ideas.

Introduction

I am a second year teacher in a school, which has received a grant to incorporate the Success For All (S.F.A.) reading program into its literacy block. The past year the schools literacy block was made up of a District-wide reading program, which made use of basal readers. Now that I have had experience with both programs I have noticed a number of differences

between the two programs that have been implemented. S.F.A. incorporates two reading programs, which are geared toward the different reading levels of the students. The reading program, Roots in grades K-1 emphasizes on the development of language skills and students begin to read using phonetically regular storybooks. The storybooks are supported by instruction that focuses on phonemic awareness, auditory discrimination, and sound blending as well as meaning, context, and self-monitoring strategies. At the second through fifth grade levels, students make use of the school or the district-selected reading materials, and/or basals, in a carefully structured set of interactive occasions where they are able to read, discuss, and write. This program or Wings as it is called, emphasizes on cooperative learning activities.

Being a second grade teacher, I teach the Wings component of the program. The reading class begins each day with a fifteen to twenty minute Listening Comprehension lesson where the teacher reads a story aloud to the class. The story needs to be related to the basal stories the students will be reading in their partners and individually. Through a discussion of the story, students are taught to apply the basic elements of the story structure to enhance their comprehension. Although students are being taught to use comprehension skills through the read-alouds, my interest was whether the read-aloud enhanced the student's ability to read. Through this study I hope to learn whether the time spent reading aloud to students is worth its weight in gold as it is the school's goal to have all students reading at grade level at or before third grade.

Review of Literature on Read-Alouds

As early as the 19th century children have been taught to read by being read to aloud. The various styles of reading aloud to a child have an important impact on the child's literacy

development. From the 1920s through the 1960s not much attention was placed on reading aloud to children, as there was the regard that early story reading was irrelevant to literacy development. Little importance was thus attached to the parent's role in the development of their children's literacy. Research done by Cullinan (1989), Donelson and Nilson(1989) and Huck, Helper and Hickman (1987), noted that being surrounded by storybooks and supportive adults helps children in their active acquisition of literacy, which is the same to say that being surrounded by oral language is a necessary factor in learning to talk. Knowledge of a child's socio-cultural experiences can provide a foundation for reading instruction.

According to Wan (2000), Tolstoy wrote the first method of teaching reading, which consisted of the teacher reading to children much the same way as a mother would read with her child. Of course reading aloud to children has been pursued at home and in schools for centuries, and indeed is probably the most highly recommended activity for encouraging language and literacy (Adams, 1990; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Goldfield & Snow, 1984). Yet some studies do not always support this technique (Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Whitehurst et al., 1994). There have been few naturalistic studies conducted on the effects on teachers reading to children, however, according to Meyer et al. (1994) upon examination of these naturalistic studies which were done in the early elementary grades, a low-to-moderate negative correlation was yielded between the teacher reading aloud to students and the students achievement in reading. In recent years it was also found that, simply reading to children isn't enough for them to excel as readers as they are not seeing or processing the text by themselves and thus are not developing strategies for reading independently (Reutzel, 2001). The issue at hand is to discern what makes read-aloud experiences effective for enhancing children's language development. Since listening skills are more advanced than reading skills until the middle grades

when reading starts to catch up, reading a book out loud to children opens up worlds of new and interesting experiences on subjects that they would not otherwise have access to.

Stories read aloud bring facts and people to life in a realistic way that encompasses historical fiction and stories from other cultures. As children are given the freedom to use their senses of sight and hearing, their attention spans begin to grow larger and their imaginations become more creative. In the early elementary grades language skills are fostered when children listen to the same types of stories over and over again until they develop a familiarity with literary elements and story structure. According to Rosenhouse et al. (1997), read-aloud sessions affect the children by enriching their vocabulary. Reading aloud can provide a wonderful model to children as to how good readers read with intonation and fluency. In addition, children are exposed to a more descriptive flow of language than that of their everyday language and dialogue, their vocabulary grows larger with each story. According to Smith and Elley (1994) who reviewed the outcomes of some research, demonstrated that vocabulary gains are extended when the teacher or adult reading aloud explains or illustrates the targeted words.

Talking about the story during and after reading can foster informal communication about words, language, ideas, and real-life experiences. Teachers may differ in their read-aloud styles (Martinez &Teale, 1993) many teachers limit the amount of dialogue during the reading of the story, and conclude with an in-depth discussion at the end of the reading. These discussions can bring about the connections from the story to their personal lives. Some teachers read the story interactively, where the teachers encourage children to interact verbally with the text during the reading of the book (Mason, Peterman, & Kerr, 1988). The questions posed during the reading of the story help's to enhance meaning construction and keeps the students engaged.

Engaged children respond to each other and to the reader of the story. This helps children make use of their various reading strategies in order to make sense and comprehend the story.

With lots of exposure to books, even the youngest of children automatically pick up concepts about print, such as how to hold a book, how to find the cover, and in what direction to turn the pages.

Read-Aloud Survey

A survey was implemented and was designed to generate information from teachers which would support or not support the assertion that reading aloud to children as often as possible helps build the foundation for later reading success. Would these responses hold consistent with the literature? The teachers were assured that they could respond anonymously to ensure that they could respond openly and that the responses could be viewed objectively. Out of the 40 surveys distributed, 22 were returned completed and only 2 had no responses. The survey that was distributed asked teachers to rank their students on a scale of 1- 4 for the following statements: 1 Agree Strongly, 2 is Agree Somewhat, 3 is Disagree Somewhat, 4 is Disagree Strongly. Comments and explanations were welcomed by each of the respondents.

In question one of the survey, that stated that in general, students enjoyed being read to, 80% agreed strongly and 20% somewhat agreed. The majority of the teachers stated that, students became attentive and practiced active listening when being read to.

Question two asked whether students showed a preference toward certain genres, and authors. Of the respondents, 35% agreed strongly, 50% agreed somewhat, and 15% disagreed somewhat. In the lower grades students enjoy all genre but prefer those that have animal characters. In the upper grades students enjoy genre that is lively and engaging. It is important to

note that the school encourages author studies where each grade focuses on a different author each month. In this way students are exposed to a variety of genres and author styles. It is imperative, that upon the selection of a book, the teacher takes into consideration the preferences and interests of the students.

Whether students are usually fully engaged during teacher read-alouds of literature was question three. Here 40% agreed strongly, 50% agreed somewhat, and 10% disagreed somewhat. Students are engaged if the story is carefully selected and thus age appropriate. The extent of engagement can be gauged by the participation of the students to questions posed during the read aloud. Here we can see that almost all the students are engaged during the read-aloud, which will elicit comprehension of the story and acquisition of vocabulary provided students are questioned accordingly.

Question four asked whether students' general reading comprehension is enhanced by read-alouds. The response to this question was that, 45% strongly agreed and 55% agreed somewhat. This is a reflection of question three because when students are engaged they are able to gain meaning and comprehend the story. A majority of the story discussion should take place during the reading of the story. Students need to be able to describe, evaluate, speculate, or make inferences about the story. They should make frequent predictions and then be able to confirm or disconfirm their predictions. Students should be able to scaffold on each other's reasoning, and explore various possibilities in their discussion.

Question five referred to the extent of student's engagement in voluntary literacy activities (e.g.,select own books) due to read-alouds. Of the respondents, 65% agreed strongly, and 35% agreed somewhat. Voluntary activities depend firstly on the students' attitudes toward reading. There are a variety of outside influences infringing upon students' motivation to read for pure

recreational purposes. Some factors may include the lack of modeling by parents and even perhaps teachers, the lack of reading ability, and past failures in reading. There are of course outside influences, for example the television, and other recreational activities. Reading aloud to students helps them to develop background knowledge about a variety of subjects, build vocabulary, become familiar with rich language patterns, develop familiarity with story structure, develop understanding of the reading process, and identify reading as an enjoyable activity. As we can see, most of the respondents agreed that reading aloud to students is motivational and a learning experience.

In question six respondents were asked if students are usually engaged during story discussion after read-alouds. It was seen that, 70% agreed strongly, 25% agreed somewhat, and only 5% disagreed somewhat. During story discussion it is important that students are able to make personal connections to the text, responding with a life-to-text or a text-to-life connection, where students use some of their own life experiences to understand or illuminate the text being read or their lives. Students should be able to generate connections to other activities, telling what they would do if they were the character, or questioning the story from their own viewpoint. Here we can see that generally students are able to comprehend the stories, because they are able to respond during the discussion. Once again the questioning technique and the types of questions asked are important to the responses the children make.

Question seven asked if students demonstrated complexity and spontaneity when responding to literature through the use of read-alouds. The responses were, 35% agreed strongly, 55% agreed somewhat, and 10% disagreed somewhat. The discussion as a whole should be a glimpse of the lived through experience of the story by the students. The spontaneous immediacy of responses would seem to indicate the engagement of the student in the world of the story. The

high percentage of responses in agreeing somewhat may be in part due to the fact that the majority of the responses were received from the lower elementary grades. They noted that the children's responses were spontaneous but not complex.

Below is a table representing the percentage of responses given for each particular question answered.

Question Number	Agree Strongly	Agree Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
1	80%	20%		
2	35%	50%	15%	
3	40%	50%	10%	
4	45%	55%		
5	65%	35%		
6	70%	25%	5%	
7	35%	55%	10%	

Conclusion

Children's responses to books and the connections they make among texts and between texts and other aspects of their lives show that individual backgrounds are important factors in

literacy development. The readers of the stories need to help children make these life-to- text connections by using stories that can be interpreted and understood as a real life events and having students use their prior knowledge in order to make sense of the literature. Children are able to extend their oral language development and have a lived through experience with the story when they are able to make connections associated with their own lives. The material that is chosen to be read aloud should represent the interests of the children in order for it to be educationally beneficial.

The questioning techniques should be such that the children acquire comprehension and vocabulary by having to retrieve words from the text. When students are engaged in the print they begin to promote their reading ability. The responses given by students are a directly related to the questioning technique used and the types of questions asked. These questions should be related to a specific reading skill. There should be a limited number of questions asked so that the children can concentrate on the listening and fluency of the story. Children respond to literature in a variety of ways, and engage different types of literacy learning activities provided they are given a supportive environment.

The evaluation of the survey is encouraging evidence on the effects of extensive read-alouds to children. It is evident that teachers need to be committed to the continuation and implementation of read-alouds as a daily program.

Recommendations

The reading aloud of a storybook needs to characterized by clear routines, and become part of the student's daily program. In order for the read-aloud to be enjoyable, the teacher needs

to choose a book ahead of time, taking into consideration the requests and interests of the students. The books need to be age appropriate and at the students comprehension level. When reading aloud to older students the books need to be engaging in order to hold their interest and make their read-aloud an enjoyable learning experience. Children need to be seated in close proximity in order to see the illustrations, particularly if it is a picture book. Students are able to use the picture clues which aide's in comprehension and the acquisition of vocabulary. Pictures become an important tool for those students who are Second Language English learners in vocabulary development.

No part of the book should be left out, from the front cover to the back of the book should, receive attention. Students need to be encouraged to talk about the story, particularly if they are able to make connections between the story and their own lives. However, students should not be forced into a discussion. Conversations that go on to long should be avoided because there is a danger of the story line being lost. There should be a limit on the number of responses, but each student should have an opportunity to respond to at least one of the questions asked. Read-alouds should reflect authors from many cultures however students should also be encouraged to read numerous titles from the same author. Students become familiar with a particular authors style and will be able to develop their own style when writing.

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